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# LOCKE'S ATTACK ON INNATISM

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Text source:

*Essay Concerning Human*

*Understanding*, book 1, chapters 1-3

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# THE DOCTRINE(S) OF INNATISM

- The patron saint of innatism is **Plato** (see his dialogue *Meno*); its great early modern (17th C) champion is **Descartes**.
  - Innatism (a.k.a. 'nativism') credits the human mind with certain inborn or pre-programmed contents, contents that the mind comes equipped with prior to and independently of experience.
  - One might endorse an innatist account of ***ideas***, or of ***knowledge***, or (the most common innatist position) of ***both ideas and knowledge***.
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# KNOWLEDGE INNATISM

- ❑ This doctrine asserts that we have access to *knowledge* that is possessed innately (rather than being derived from experience)
    - *E.g. 'All events have a cause', 'God exists', 'lying is wrong'*
  - ❑ It is invoked to explain how we can have knowledge of certain propositions that seems to go beyond experience, either (i) because of its universal applicability, or because (ii) its subject matter transcends experiential reality
  - ❑ Common candidates for innate knowledge:
    - Knowledge of the laws of nature, logical and mathematical truths, ethical truths, metaphysical truths concerning transcendent objects like God, the soul, and Plato's Forms
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# IDEA INNATISM

(a.k.a. CONCEPT INNATISM)

- ❑ This doctrine asserts that we have certain inborn **ideas** (ideas which are built into the mind prior to experience, rather than being derived from experience)
  - ❑ It is invoked to explain how we can have ideas that do not correspond to anything in experience, and are not even constructable from materials that are given in experience
  - ❑ Common candidates for innate ideas: ideas of **God**, **causation**, **substance**, basic **mathematical and logical ideas**, perhaps **moral rightness and wrongness**
  - **Knowledge innatism** seems to entail **idea innatism**.
  - But **idea innatism** does not (obviously) entail **knowledge innatism**.
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# LOCKE'S ATTACK ON INNATISM

- **The attack on innate *knowledge*:**

- Book 1 chapters 1-2 attack the theory of knowledge innatism in both its 'speculative' and 'practical' variants

- **The attack on innate *ideas*:**

- Book 1 chapter 3 argues that certain paradigmatic candidates for innate ideas (*God, substance, identity*) aren't really innate at all
  - Book 2 will present the positive theory of the origin of our ideas, showing how *all the ideas we do in fact have* are explicable in terms of experience. Since this theory is simpler and more elegant than the rival theory of innate ideas, it should replace it. ('Ockham's razor'?)
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# THE ATTACK ON INNATE KNOWLEDGE (*ECHU bk. 1 ch. 1-2*)

- Locke's dilemma for the knowledge innatist: Is their claim (a) that everyone actually has this knowledge at their fingertips all along, or (b) that everyone has the innate *potential* or *capacity* to come this knowledge?
  - If (a) then it is empirically false, since children and 'idiots' do not have the putative knowledge. Moreover, consider the disagreements in ethics and theology. (ECHU 1.1, 1.2)
  - If (b) then it is trivialized, for every proposition we come to know (including all those we clearly come to know through experience) is innate in this trivial sense. (ECHU 1.1.5)
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